

## [Teacher--Retired]

Miss Mari Tomasi Recorded in Writers' Section Files

DATE: AUG [??]

TEACHER - RETIRED

Alice Boardman pushed back wisps of yellow-gray hair and removed a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. She wrapped the glasses in a scrap of white cloth and laid them carefully in a black leather case. This she placed on the low, glossy oak bookcase that ran along two walls of the room, length and width. Beyond was a kitchenette. To the left a partly opened door revealed a narrow bed, the coverlets neatly turned down though it was but four in the afternoon. "I'm always finding myself with time on my hands," Miss Boardman said. "Three small rooms aren't half enough to keep me busy during the day. I get my bed ready for night right after lunch."

"When my brother was alive we lived over on Orange Street. We had six large rooms. I used to complain that there was too much house work to be done after school hours. I stopped teaching six years ago. Now I have all the time in the world to do things and I don't know what to do except, perhaps, read. My brother died two years ago. I miss him. He was all I had left of the family. There's a sister out West. She went there to teach in a mission school. I haven't seen her for fifteen years, I almost forget she's part of the family. She's never been to Vermont, and I've never visited the Dakotas. It's strange, isn't it, how two people can drift apart? We were so close as children. When I came to Vermont she promised to send in an application for the first vacancy in my school. But the next year a 2 chum of hers went West, and Rose went, too.

"I was born in Everett, Massachusetts. I taught there seventeen years. Seventeen years puts you into too deep a rut. I think that's why I came to Barre. That and the fact that it was

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a sure job.” Miss Boardman's eyes held a ghost of a twinkle. “Father was a good friend of the school superintendent. I don't suppose times have changed so much after all. The right contacts get you the right jobs.

“My first glimpse of Barre was by night, and it was only the residential section I saw. I'd been accustomed to Everett and Boston. Cities. Orange Street by moonlight seemed a cozy cluster of white houses. In my first letter to my sister I remember describing Barre as a little white nest in a green mountain valley. I suppose this description was prompted somewhat by my recent study of the region, because actually I hadn't seen much of the terrain, coming through as I did at night. In my second letter a week later I explained that it certainly was a little nest, a bees' nest, a hive humming with active workers. For seventeen years I'd been teaching Massachusetts fifth graders that Barre, Vermont was a granite center, but I hadn't told them that it was no more typical of Vermont than, well...Venice is of Italy.

“I wrote my sister that she could go on picturing a green, pastoral Vermont, with milk cans, lumber-jacks, sugar-making, peaceful little towns, but when she got to the core of the Green Mountains, to Barre City, then I advised her to shift the scene. I told her that Barre was a one-industry town, the industry was granite, and that granite had brought more nationalities to the town than any other industry in Vermont. Italians, Spanish, French, Swedes, Irish. 'Vermont's outlander,' our ex-mayor calls Barre.

“Through the fifteen years that I've taught in Barre I'd say that on an average half of my pupils' parents were foreign born. Most of them European born, except for the French. The French who came to the Barre sheds and quarries were mostly Canadian born. Today you're hardly able to distinguish one nationality from the other. When I first came here to teach, some of the children dressed old country style. Some of the little Spanish and Italian girls wore gold earrings. Today only a few do. I remember a little Italian girl, Monica was her name. She teaches school in Burlington now. She was shy, very sensitive; at the recess period she kept to herself in a corner. One winter there was a whole week she

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didn't appear at school. Her parents sent me no news of her. One of the pupils from her neighborhood told me she'd seen Monica making a snowman in the backyard that morning and ended with, 'she wouldn't be doing that if she had a cold, would she?'

"That evening I called on Monica's mother. Before I was inside the door I heard a scampering of feet on bare, wooden steps, and I had a hunch that Monica had recognized my voice and had gone upstairs in hiding.

"No, Monica's mother assured me, Monica did not have a cold; it was the earrings that kept her from school. She came home one afternoon crying that two classmates had laughed and made fun of them, and she begged her mother to let her take them off. Monica's mother would not take them off. They were 4 sent from [Brieso?], Italy, by her husband's mother. The father had pierced Monica's ears and put the rings there himself. He'd been away all week. Monday he was coming back. Monica's mother shrugged her shoulders. If he wanted to remove them when he came back, all right. If not, well they stayed there. As for the days Monica had missed at school, well, she demanded of me, Monica got good marks didn't she? Besides, the two younger children were having colds and Monica could help with them.

"I asked her: suppose your husband insists that she wear them? She'll have to go to school, you know.

"Yes, Monica's mother understood that, and she smiled gratefully when I promised there would be no more fun poked at Monica's earrings.

"Monica came to school Monday morning minus the gold earrings. In Monica's young mind the discarding of these earrings must have been the final step towards Americanization. She lost her shyness and selfconsciousness. At recess she left her corner and played with the rest of the children. Speaking of Americanization, for two years Americanization classes were held in the Casa Italiana of our Community House, for adult Italians. The granite-cutting Barre Italians come from northern Italy, they're a higher class than the

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southerners who flock to Massachusetts and New York. They adapt themselves more easily to their new home, and American customs.

"You'd be surprised how many mothers warned their children to stay away from their frog and wop classmates. I mean years ago. Today they inter-marry, like that." Miss Boardman snapped her fingers. 5 "Most of these children had healthy bodies and did well in school. Many of them didn't stop with a high school education. Some have gone into professional fields. We have five or six young Italian doctors in Barre, and perhaps as many lawyers. All Barre born. And you'll find that most of the fathers were at some time in the granite business. Common laborers, or carvers, or perhaps shed owners. You'll find several sheds owned by men who'd been cutting stone themselves not so many years ago. Italian names are common today on the High School athletic teams. Baseball, basketball, football. They're good athletes. Often some Italian boy receives a scholarship for some college or university.

"I liked the Swedes," Miss Boardman confided. "Most of them were sunny-faced and always happy. It was hard to break them of the broken English they spoke at home. And I've seen French children cling to a French accent through the eighth grade, and in some instances through high school.

"The Italians and Spanish [shone?] during the singing hour. They had rich, sure voices and they were quick to catch an air. We've had real musical talent from Barre. One Italian girl I know studied music abroad, now she's giving concerts in the States. One evening last year she played and sang here in Barre. The hall was filled.

"Barre schools are good. At one time all the children attended the public schools - we have several of them for small children - but now the Catholics have their own parochial graded school. I suppose that before long they'll have a Catholic high school, too. I'm told that during the last four or five 6 years some of our Barre Catholic children have commuted to Montpelier to attend St. Michael's High School.

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"I miss teaching. "I miss young life around me. The woman downstairs has three children. The little boy was a friendly chap. He used to come up and visit with me. This spring appendicitis kept him from school. He had a dread of not being able to keep up with his class. I offered to teach him. I wasn't very successful. The tutoring was successful, he made his class, but I lost a lively little friend. Ever since that month of teaching he's lost his [ease?] with me, he's been very reserved - remembering always that he's the pupil and I the teacher——" Miss Boardman smiled [ruefully?].